



# **Lost Innocence: Dickens' Exposé of Orphaned Children**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the harsh realities faced by orphaned children in Victorian England, particularly within the context of foundling hospitals and workhouses. Through a critical analysis of Charles Dickens' seminal novel, *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), this study highlights the social injustices, poverty, and inequality that pervaded the lives of marginalized children. The article explores the historical context of the Poor Laws, the workhouse system, and the Foundling Hospital, shedding light on the inhumane conditions and societal attitudes that contributed to the struggles of orphaned children. By analyzing Dickens' portrayal of these issues, this article underscores the ongoing relevance of his work and its continued ability to evoke empathy and inspire social change.

Dickens, a highly influential author, masterfully portrays timeless human experiences, the struggle between good and evil, and moral dilemmas, while emphasizing the power of redemption and social justice. His enduring novels continue to inspire, challenge, and entertain readers globally. *Oliver Twist* vividly portrays the brutal treatment of children in the workhouse system, while *Nicholas Nickleby* critiques the abusive practices of Yorkshire schools. *David Copperfield* recounts the author's personal struggles as an unhappy child, tracing his journey from childhood to adulthood. *Bleak House* satirizes the legal system. *Great Expectations* explores themes of social class and redemption. *A tale of two cities* is Dickens's great novel about the French Revolution. His blend of humor and social commentary yielded timeless characters, inspiring readers and writers globally. The vivid imagery and symbolism employed rendered the descriptions and plots compelling. Dickens masterfully integrated social commentary and irony into his narratives, complemented by rich character development and dialogue that brought the stories to life. His storytelling demonstrated exceptional narrative structure and use of foreshadowing. Charles Dickens' novels frequently depicted the hardships faced by orphaned children and the societal problems prevalent during his era.

**Keywords:** Victorian England, Orphaned children, Workhouses, Foundling hospitals, Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist, Social justice, Poverty, Inequality.

## Introduction

The Foundling Hospital in London, England, was established by British sea captain and philanthropist Thomas Coram in 1739. In 1750, child mortality rates approximated fifty percent, with even higher rates observed in foundling hospitals. These institutions offered support to single mothers, assisting them in navigating the challenges of unmarried motherhood. A foundling was an abandoned child entrusted to the care of others. A foundling hospital served as a refuge where desperate mothers left their infants, with the possibility of reclaiming them later; however, this rarely occurred. Each admitted infant received a new name, was baptized, and was given a small token, a secret identifier for the mother should she return. As the hospital's popularity increased, admissions became more stringent, requiring mothers to provide a name and explanation for relinquishing their child. Furthermore, they had to demonstrate good character or at least a history of good character prior to their pregnancy, and attest that the pregnancy was an isolated incident. Children admitted before age five frequently resided with foster families in rural areas before returning to the founding hospital for education and, at age fifteen, apprenticeships in domestic service or the military. However, the lack of a true childhood, coupled with indiscriminate admissions in the mid-1750s (accepting all children, not just those whose mothers could be identified), resulted in appalling mortality rates reaching eighty one percent. The Foundling Hospital's indiscriminate admissions policy led to a high mortality rate. Many children did not survive to adulthood, and those who did often suffered from long-term health consequences. The hospital's inability to manage the influx of children resulted in overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions, increasing the risk of disease transmission. Further the hospital faced financial and resource constraints, making it challenging to provide adequate food, clothing, and medical care to the large number of children. The hospital's medical facilities and staff were often inadequate, leading to delayed or inadequate treatment of illnesses. Children were exposed to various diseases, including smallpox, measles, and dysentery, due to poor sanitation, hygiene, and ventilation. Inadequate nutrition and poor living conditions weakened the children's immune systems, making them more susceptible to illnesses. The hospital admitted children with pre-existing health issues, further increasing the mortality rate.

There is a poignant portrayal of orphans in foundling hospitals and workhouses within several of Dickens' prominent works. The following passage from *Oliver Twist* anticipates the neglect and cruelty faced by orphans in the foundling hospitals and workhouses:

- *"the parish authorities magnanimously and humanely resolved, that Oliver should be 'farmed,' or, in other words, that he should be dispatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws, rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly female, who received the culprits at and for the consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week. Sevenpence-halfpenny's worth per week is a good round diet for a child; a great deal may be got for sevenpence-halfpenny, quite enough to overload its stomach, and make it uncomfortable. The elderly female was a woman of wisdom and experience; she knew what was good for children; and she had a very accurate perception of what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them. Thereby finding in the lowest depth a deeper still; and proving herself a very great experimental philosopher."*<sup>1</sup>

Oliver's birth in a workhouse exemplifies the harsh conditions and mistreatment endured by orphaned children. This quote illustrates the bureaucratic and impersonal nature of the workhouse system. This excerpt from *Oliver Twist* serves as a pointed critique of the treatment of impoverished children in Victorian England. The passage details the parish authorities' decision to send Oliver to a workhouse, where he will be "farmed" to an elderly woman for a weekly payment. The key aspects include the satirical depiction of the parish's cruelty and negligence; the woman's appropriation of funds, leaving children inadequately clothed and fed; the inherent exploitation of vulnerable individuals; and the stark irony of the parish's purportedly humanitarian action masking a self-serving agenda. Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* offers a pointed critique of the Victorian-era English welfare system. There is depiction of the workhouse's harsh conditions which elicits empathy for Oliver and his peers.

This passage serves as a condemnation of the Poor Laws, which mandated institutionalization of the impoverished, separating families and imposing inhumane treatment. The 1834 Poor Law amendments, predicated on the flawed premise that work inherently possesses moral value and individual effort solely determines success, viewed poverty as a consequence of indolence and moral failing. Dickens refutes these assumptions through satirical commentary, presenting the workhouse's realities without embellishment. The system's inherent cruelty underscores the Poor Laws' absurdity, advocating for systemic reform. Through *Oliver Twist*, Dickens highlights welfare system injustices, aiming to inspire change and more compassionate social welfare policies. His analysis of the shortcomings of the poor laws remains highly relevant, underscoring the critical need for compassionate and efficient social support structures for society's most vulnerable populations.

Dickens criticizes the ill treatment of impoverished orphan and commodification of the poor, particularly children, as objects rather than individuals. The workhouse system which was designed for poverty relief was ineffective and had systemic failures thereby failed to achieve the intended purpose. Dickens reveals the exploitation of vulnerable groups, including children and the elderly, by those in authority. During the Victorian era, a pervasive notion prevailed among the general public, which attributed poverty to individual moral deficiencies. This widespread belief posited that those who found themselves in impoverished circumstances were, in fact, reaping the consequences of their own personal failings. According to this perspective, poverty was not a result of societal or economic factors, but rather a reflection of an individual's inherent character flaws and moral degeneracy. They believed that it was the paupers own fault that they were poor due to their '*inherent deficiencies*.'<sup>2</sup>

In general it can be said that families on the verge of starvation regarded workhouses as the dreaded 'last resort' a place to turn to only when all other options had been exhausted as Charles Dickens accurately puts it:

*"all poor should have the alternative of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it."*<sup>3</sup>

Overcrowding and substandard living conditions heightened the risk of childhood illness, resulting in a drastically increased mortality rate. The hospital faced significant financial challenges, relying heavily on donations and charitable contributions.

It is posited that Charles Dickens may have drawn inspiration from "Hans Sloane" when developing the character of Mr. Brownlow in *Oliver Twist*. Dickens was a staunch supporter of the Foundling Hospital and its mission. John Brownlow's novel, "Hans Sloane: A Tale Illustrating the History of the Foundling Hospital in London," explores the social issues and real-life occurrences within the London institution. The narrative examines themes of abandonment and identity as the protagonist, Hans Sloane, undertakes a quest to discover his origins. Brownlow, a prominent figure at the foundling hospital, leveraged the novel to advocate for such institutions and defend them against criticism. Societal pressures compelled single mothers to relinquish their children to these foundling hospitals. Substandard living conditions prevailed in Victorian London workhouses. Reverend John T. Becher's devised workhouse system which intended to provide sustenance and shelter to the indigent, unfortunately resulted in inhumane living circumstances. These included unsanitary conditions, insufficient toilet facilities, and a lack of potable water. Inmates received meager rations, leading to widespread malnutrition. They were subjected to arduous physical labor, such as stone breaking or oakum picking, under a regime of strict rules and punishments. Children in the workhouses were deliberately kept on the brink of starvation, forced to cling to the meager charity that sustained them. And yet, this precarious existence was scarcely more enviable than that of their counterparts on the streets, who faced an equally bleak struggle for survival. The living inside the workhouse or in the streets didn't make that much a difference in regard to provision of food shows the following scene taken from Dickens' novel. The probably most famous scene of the entire book, the '*Please Sir, I want some more*' –scene, where Oliver – after he '*and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months*'<sup>4</sup> –dares to ask for a little more gruel and thereby, starts an enormous uproar, illustrates the terrible conditions inside workhouses. Oliver starved and in a state of great trouble got courage to ask for another bowl of gruel. He received harsh negative reaction from workhouse officials, and was punished. Oliver, a young orphan, has been living in a workhouse for three months, where he and his companions suffer from malnutrition and poor living conditions. After finishing his meager portion of gruel, Oliver asks the workhouse master for more food, sparking a dramatic reaction. The workhouse's inadequate food supply and Oliver's desperation underscore the harsh realities of poverty. Oliver's bold request showcases his innocence and courage in the face of adversity. Dickens critiques the social welfare system, highlighting the need for reform and better treatment of the poor. The gruel, a thin, unappetizing porridge, symbolizes the meager existence of the poor, while Oliver's request represents the universal human desire for sustenance and dignity. This scene has become an iconic representation of the struggles of the poor and vulnerable, resonating with readers for generations.

Widespread diseases such as cholera, typhoid fever, and tuberculosis significantly increased mortality rates. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Britain's poor law system housed the most destitute in workhouses, providing food and shelter in exchange for compulsory labor. However, living conditions were harsh, with men, women, and children separated into different sections, leading to family separation and instances where

individuals chose starvation over institutionalization. Ginger Suzanne Frost quotes a striking observation about children in workhouses in her book "Victorian Childhoods".

*"Children who moved into the workhouse with their parents were rigidly separated from them and kept away from adults in general so they would not 'learn pauperism' from them and become adult paupers themselves."*<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

Charles Dickens, a trailblazing literary figure of his time, played a pivotal role in bringing about a significant shift in the representation of working-class orphaned children in literature. Alongside other prominent contemporary authors, Dickens pioneered the portrayal of these marginalized individuals as main characters in his works, thereby humanizing their experiences and struggles. Through his writings, he deliberately shed light on the dark underbelly of Victorian society, exposing the harsh realities of extreme poverty, child labour, and social injustice that pervaded the urban landscape. Dickens' seminal novel, "Oliver Twist", is a testament to his commitment to social commentary and reform. By masterfully weaving a narrative that highlighted the plight of the vulnerable and the oppressed, Dickens sparked a national conversation about the urgent need for social change. His work not only raised public awareness about the inhumane conditions within workhouses but also challenged the prevailing attitudes towards poverty and social welfare.

The issues Dickens highlighted in "Oliver Twist" remain remarkably relevant today, retaining their topicality across centuries. The novel's themes of poverty, inequality, and social injustice continue to resonate with audiences worldwide, serving as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggles faced by marginalized communities. Through his fiction, Dickens aimed to evoke an emotional response from his readers, fostering a deeper understanding and empathy for the struggles of those living on the fringes of society. By tackling sensitive topics and shedding light on the darkest aspects of human experience, Dickens paved the way for future generations of writers to explore similar themes and social issues. His legacy continues to inspire authors, artists, and social reformers, cementing his place as one of the most influential and beloved authors in literary history.

## References

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- [4] Dickens, Charles, Oliver Twist, p.13.
- [5] Frost, Ginger: Victorian Childhoods, p. 122.